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ABSTRACT

Dissatisfaction with existing preschool teacher training programs, which overemphasize educational theory and neglect practice teaching, led to the development of the preschool teacher training program described in this paper. Initial activities of the program involve group dynamics principles and human relations training to assist students to develop self-evaluation skills. Once students are competent at analyzing their own actions and those of their group they are considered able to understand the kinds of situations and problems which occur in the typical nursery school. A simulated nursery school was created to provide experience with the varied issues of early childhood education. This setting, which includes children, permits tutors and students to discuss practical matters affecting the children, the school as a social organism, home and society, the educational system, and professional roles. Written materials, slide-tape programs, role playing, and taped interviews with parents and staff are used to supplement this practical training. (In this document, a vignette of a training activity is provided and pertinent educational, developmental, and organizational issues are commented upon within the activity. Other learning activities are described.) (Author/DB)

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AN ATTEMPT TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION

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In this paper I hope to convey to you some of my disquiet at what sometimes passes for teacher education and describe an attempt to make courses more relevant and valuable to student teachers. As the title implies this is essentially a practical presentation.

My uneasiness about teacher education began some sixteen years ago when a somewhat cynical colleague hearing of my appointment as an educational psychology lecturer at a college of education remarked: 'Ah, he's going to his eternal rest!' My own training had been largely theoretical and so, along with my colleagues, I too proceeded to indulge myself by pouring forth much educational theory broken only by brief forays into schools to supervise students on teaching practice. Colleagues in other faculties worked like beavers talking at great length about the best use of creative areas garden activities, fantasy and cognitive areas. And, of course, great hunks of apparatus were made, films shown, visiting lecturers talked and, in case the students were not being academically stretche enough, there were the academic courses to be studied in depth. An children? Well, courses in developmental psychology, in depth observation of children while on teaching practice and much discussi about them took care of that.

The result of all these typically earnest activities which occur in many teacher education courses in Africa, Britain and North America, as I have seen for myself, is frequently a jigsaw puzzle in the minds of students. It is often only the exceptional student who can fit it all together and see the relevance of the pieces of theory. Many students find it all a 'buzzing confusion', and frequently question the relevance of the whole operation while weak students yearn for the limited teaching practice and the end of the long four year trail. I believe that there is a lack of coherence in most courses or as Weber (1973) puts it 'programme components are determined more by tradition than function'. There is a yawning gap between theory and practice; this is the great bogey of teacher education.

Faced with this familiar problem in my own 70 year old college, we have tried to bridge the gap by the use of case studies, simulations, action mazes, decision making analyses and role plays. The contents of all these activities are based firmly on classroom reality and link the behaviour and development of young children in a school, the school itself, the social background, the educational authority and the teacher as a professional with education, psychological and sociological theory. The theory is demonstrated to be a helpful and often indispensable aid in the solution of both mundane and knotty problems in the nursery school. Under the heading of 'School Dynamics' in three years of a four year course two hours per week is spent on these activities which supplement normal education lectures and, of course, normal teaching practice.

We found that if students are to become fully involved in this programme of discussion, of wrestling with the manifold problems of the very young child, of sharpening their minds on the minds of fellow students, of becoming motivated, sentient people able to deal with the linking of theory and practice of education it is necessary to provide preliminary human relations training. For the programme to be meaningful so that students can internalise their learning it is imperative that students should be actively stimulated to probe, to question, to relate well to others and, what is fundamental, be able to understand themselves. Using group dynamics principles tutors in the School Dynamics programme generate their groups with lives of their own before tackling practical teaching or simulated school incidents. They do this by first sharing experiences far removed from the decision making areas of the classroom. Once students feel at home analysing their own actions and those of their groups they are in a better position to consider in depth the kinds of situations and problems in the typical nursery school. Johanson (1979) sums up the nature of the programme in these words:

'To be a successful teacher involves sharing a great deal of oneself with others and trying to understand why other people, and especially children, behave as they do. Teachers are in daily contact with their pupils and colleagues, and very often with the parents. The more open, free and friendly they are able to be, the more they will enjoy the work and the more successful they will be.

Human relations are every bit as important as the imparting of knowledge and skills.'

In order to facilitate the discussion of child behaviour, child development, and the child's social and educational setting we decided to use the highly motivating simulation technique. Based on the ideas of Cruickshank (1967, 1969, 1971) Walford (1975) and techniques used in business management education we created a fictitious nursery school complete with children modelled firmly on a typical nursery school of our province and district. Here we have a setting where tutors and education lecturers can join in dialogue with students to distuss practical matters affecting the children, the school as a social organism, home and society, the educational system and our professional roles. Extensive information is provided in written form and by means of slide-tape programmes, taped interviews with parents, staff etc., taped role plays and spontaneous role plays. Tutors, lecturers and students with the same background knowledge can thus work on common issues and lecturers can introduce students to relevant theory, readings and research which can be directly helpful to the practical situation under discussion.

As I can't bring you into Natal Training College to see the programme in action let me try to describe an actual situation we discussed with second year students in 1979. In this way you will gain a clearer idea of organisation and see the learning potential of the technique; of course, not all situations are considered in exactly the same way because as teachers we know the necessity of ringing the changes.

The situation under discussion was this:

'Martin Hendrichs arrived at school in the morning proudly carrying 10 cents which the mouse had brought him when he put his tooth into his slipper the previous night.

Pierre Stanley-Smith promptly told him that the mouse had nothing to do with the money and it was a 'rubbish story'. Pierre dejectedly put his money away in his locker.

Later that day Carome Royden runs up to tell you that Daniel De Beer has taken the money out of Marin's locker and that Martin is in tears.

You suspect that Carone may be telling a tale and you are aware that Daniel is at times treated as the scapegoat. You look up to see Daniel with flushed cheeks looking rather embarrassed.
What do you do?'

The students met in plenary session in a large hall; they were arranged in their tutorial groups - six students in a group. They were familiar with the files of Martin, Pierre, Carome and Daniel. So that what follows can be intelligible and show you the practical and theoretical being welded together here is a very brief thumbnail sketch of the four children (60 pages in a few lines!)

Daniel is an illegitimate child in a Children's Home - mother neglected child - subsequently married and child was badly treated by unstable husband - Child Welfare intervened. Mother is emotionally immature - child sees her occasionally. At school Daniel is confused, unsure of himself and unhappy. He is frequentl a scapegoat who accepts unkindness apathetically. Oldest in group. Reports refer to withdrawal or over-reaction and being aggressive at times. Classified as 'dull normal'.

Martin is well-adjusted, friendly and well liked. Good, stable home background.

Pierre is extremely bright. Relates well to his teacher and peers; both parents are well-to-do professional people.

Carome is reserved and correct. Dislikes noise or mess. Unable to relax and play as a child; treated at home as a mini-adult. Spends much time with grandmother. Does not fit in with peer group.

The senior tutor orientated the students to the situation in these terms:

'After the events of the morning you realise just what responsibility is involved in teaching a lively group of five year olds. You recall little Martin with his bright-eyed excitement as he told you of the tooth-mouse and then the total disillusionment on his face when he was told it was 'rubbish'. Will he still believe the story or will he feel deceived?

Carome Royden - rather a self-righteous little miss - is she a sneaky tell-tale or was she correct in telling you about Daniel? Poor Daniel, he always seems to be on the losing end.

As these thoughts tumble in your mind you make your way to the staff room, where Mrs. Cartwright is relaxing at lunch time after seeing off the last child in her group. Mrs.Cartwright, as you know, is in cnarge of the three year old reception class and has a two year Nursery Nurse Diploma from the United Kingdom which is not recognised by the Central Education Authority; she has had twenty-five years experience with young children. She has two children, both recently married.

You .....'

At this point, there was a role play of a conversation between Mrs. Cartwright and the young teacher in which the matter of the tooth-mouse myth was discussed quite forcibly. Father Christmas and the Stork myths were inevitably included; the whole question of being honest with children was raised. Even the question of belief in the existence of God entered the picture.

The role play was interrupted so that students and tutors could have a buzz session on their attitude to the tooth-mouse myth and the two conflicting parental attitudes which were revealed. Their thinking was recorded for a report back at the end of the session.

The role play continued with a discussion about Daniel's guilt and his being an institutionalised child. These were then discussed by the groups who reported back to the plenary session. During the discussion, time was devoted to examining the files, readings and the tutors made appropriate contributions. Finally the senior tutor drew the threads of the discussion. Here is an extract dealing with Daniel but, of course, many of these points were amplified in educational psychology lectures later.

'A critical aspect of the field into which the child is born and in which it grows to maturity is the invisible field consisting of attitudes, feelings, expectations, wishes and ideas that the important people in his environment have regarding him. Is he welcome or unwanted? Are his parents loving, or cold and disinterested? With Daniel the answer is obvious.

The view generally accepted is that a child sees and evaluates himself as he thinks others see and evaluate him. The accepted child feels positively towards others whereas rejected children tend to see themselves as inferior and inadequate.

In implicit personality theory (and here references were provided) every perceiver has a relatively constant set of typical expectations about the organisation of personality, which are reflected in his perception and judgement of others. But what if these theories are wrong and based on stereotypes and superstitions.

Look at Amy Cartwright in her perceptions of Daniel as an institutionalised child. She has a stereotyped idea in her head and irrespective of how Daniel actually is, she tends to make him fit her stereotype mould of an institutionalised child. The influence of our general opinion about a person on our evaluation of his specific actions is called the halo effect. A generally positive evaluation of somebody tends to lead to an overestimation of his or her desirable traits and an underestimation of his or her undesirable traits. Conversely a negative evaluation of Daniel, causes an overestimation of a cluster of further negative traits which possibly do not exist. (Further references were provided at this point)

We also see stereotyping of Daniel.

Two aspects of stereotyping are apparent:

i. the tendency to generalise about certain groups i.e. to ascribe certain characteristics to certain groups e.g. students are irresponsible, women are bad drivers, you can't trust institution children.

ii. the tendency to ascribe the characteristics associated with a group to individual members of that group.

Thus the perceiver will tend to attribute all the characteristics she associates with an institutionalised child, to Daniel, even if there is no objective justification for this.

Daniel is constantly labelled with a variety of negative labels he is regarded as being slow and dull, a passive follower, unoriginal, unenthusiastic and having negative attitudes and so the self-fulfilling prophecy emerges and Daniel actually behaves as though he is slow and dull - a passive follower; he is unoriginal, unenthusiastic and negativistic. Through being part of a minority group and different, he becomes the prime target for scapegoating. Whether Daniel is guilty or not, he tends to take the blame - in this instance, for taking money. (Information provided on 'self-fulfilling prophecy' research)

Daniel's reaction to this is formed by his perceptions of the attitudes and feelings underlying the actions and words of others. How do you think Daniel will react to discovering what others think of him? Through interaction with others, he defines himself and discovers his nature and potential. Negative expectations of a child will lead to a poor self-concept. His feelings of self-rejection, inferiority and helplessness need to be replaced with feelings of esteem and respect for his human dignity. This is your challenge. So how should you help Daniel? (Reference here to educational research)

At this stage of moral development, a child is developing a conscience or superego. He is forming a standard for acceptable behaviour, largely through identification with the parent. Studies show that high levels of conscience are related to a warm, rewarding and nurturant parent-child relationship. (References given) Knowing Daniel's situation, how can we deal with this problem? If we ignore it, presuming that he has taken the money, he will probably repeat the behaviour.

If we directly confront him with 'Did you take the money?' he will probably deny it and then what is the next move? Rather approach the child and present him with an opportunity to save face e.g. 'Did you play a trick on Martin and hide his money? Poor Martin is so sad and upset that I am also very upset. Let us give him back the money.'

There are three possible reactions to this approach viz.,

i. If he has the money and gives it back he will have saved face and been made aware of the fact that he has made someone sad and that taking money is unacceptable behaviour.

ii. If he has the money, yet denies this, he is still made aware of the fact that it is unacceptable to hurt people by taking their belongings.

iii. If he is innocent, no harm has been done. There still remains the problem of Daniel having to live with unjust accusations.'

I have dwelt at some length on this situation to illustrate the kinds of insights a student can obtain by facing a practical problem in this way, having to make a decision and being obliged to refer to educational theory to help her make a wise one. I need hardly point out the way in which this technique focuses on children as individuals.

The incidents cover a wide range of difficulties commonly faced by the nursery school teacher - some of them are organisational others are as diverse as difficulties with identical twins, imaginary friends, tricky behaviour, relationships with colleagues, parents, the education department, exceptional children, care of pets, awkward questions, health problems etc.

Another technique currently being investigated at my College is the 'Action Maze' as outlined by Zoll (1969)

The Maze begins with a statement of a problem a teacher might be encountering e.g. it could concern a 'stuttering' child. Some action must be taken - again decision making - and the student involves herself in the exercise as the person facing the child's problem. Her first action is to decide what to do by selecting one of a number of alternatives, next to which are page references directing her to the next step which usually means a further decision

The student keeps a record of the path taken, including the dead ends, to resolve the problem and with her tutor analyses the factors considered at each of the decision points. In addition, the student refers to literature which possibly influenced her decisions and so theory enters the scene. The path down which one individual student proceeds in taking action to resolve a

difficulty may well differ from that of other individuals so there is no one path in real life for the solution of problems. Much depends on the individual's own actions and attitudes at each decision point but also her own background and professional knowledge. A link with the Group Communication Programme described earlier can clearly be discerned here.

Action Mazes are a far cry from reading and hearing about education because the student becomes personally involved and the objective of the task is abundantly clear. Students learn how to make wise professional decisions instead of simply contemplating them. The work of Bishop and Whitfield (1972) is valuable in this area as well.

There are other techniques for linking theory and practice which are to be explored by my lecturers e.g. video simulated problems, in-basket exercises. It should be emphasised that all the techniques mentioned in this paper are underpinned by lectures and readings. Professor Paul Hirst (1974) discussing this kind of work maintained that

> 'This is not to say that there would be no lectures or classes devoted to philosophy or psychology in isolation, only that the content of such work would spring from and run alongside collaborative work on practical issues.'

And what has been the students' reaction?

Here is a brief summary.

Comprehensive questionnaires were completed by students at the end of 1979. The following questions brought forth very positive responses from more than 95% of the students -

i. Do you think that the experience of 'School Dynamics' made a contribution towards your awareness of problems in the last teaching practice?

ii. Do you think this experience is likely to be of use to you as a practising teacher?

iii. Do you feel that worthwhile conclusions resulted from your discussion of situations?

iv. Would you welcome more time in which to study the 'Readings' in more depth with tutors?

On the subject of the Readings there was a positive response to the suggestion that they might be able to purchase the book! The one overwhelmingly negative response was to a suggestion that the size of tutorial groups be increased for a greater sharing of ideas. It was clear from the surveys of staff and student opinion that this programme should be refined and expanded.

The six most effective techniques as far as students were concerned were in order: role-play, guest speakers, close study of personal files, tape-slide programmes, panel discussions and readings.

In on-going research Ter-Morshuizen (1979) has inter-alia been examining two interesting topics related to the teaching of very young children and to the incidents and simulator. She has conducted a statistical analysis to determine (a) whether student teachers' evaluations of their pupils are based on superficial variables e.g. appearance, names, home background and what is important for an examination of the simulation technique (b) whether they treat the simulated children in the same way as real children. It appears from preliminary statistical results that the students do in fact use the same superficial variables for the simulated as for real children - they look on the simulated children as if they were real. This result confirms staff observation of the way in which students speak of the 'children' and the situations as if they existed.

This kind of attempt to bring theory and practice together in early childhood teacher education involves much time, effort and expertise. Materials have to be generated within the College to suit the needs of the area; students and staff also have to be clear on the objectives of the course and of the case studies and devised situations. The rewards are increased student motivation, greater staff collaboration and far more relevance and coherence in the course as a whole.

You may like to try out these ideas in your courses. I have found they work.

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